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## **Agenda building and setting in a referendum campaign: Investigating the flow of arguments among campaigners, the media, and the public**

Wirth, Werner ; Matthes, J ; Schemer, C ; Wettstein, M ; Friemel, Thomas N ; Hänggli, R ; Siegert, G

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National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR)  
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Working Paper No. 22

**Agenda Building and Setting in a Referendum Campaign.  
Investigating the Flow of Arguments among Campaigners, the  
Media, and the Public**

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**Abstract:**

This study is the first of its kind to test second level agenda building and setting effects in the course of a referendum campaign. Personal standardized interviews with 47 different campaign managers are linked to a content analysis of TV and newspaper coverage, and a three-wave public opinion survey. The results demonstrate the dynamic flow of arguments in the agenda building and setting process; top-down from the campaigners to the news media, and the public.

**Keywords:** Agenda Setting, Arguments, Referendum Campaign, Panel Survey, Content Analysis

## **Agenda Building and Setting in a Referendum Campaign. Investigating the Flow of Arguments among Campaigners, the Media, and the Public**

The agenda setting function of the news media refers to the well-established effect that the repeated coverage about an issue raises the importance of that issue in the public's mind. The first systematic study was conducted by McCombs and Shaw who found correlations between the media agenda and the public agenda.<sup>1</sup> Over the last decades, researchers have accumulated strong evidence for agenda setting covering numerous issues in many countries and for all types of news media.<sup>2</sup> Most agenda setting research since McCombs and Shaw's seminal study has focused on the relationship between the media's agenda and the public agenda (agenda setting). These studies combine a content analysis of news media with public opinion surveys. Other studies have examined the various factors that shape the agenda presented by the mass media (agenda building). This line of research mostly investigates the correlation between news releases of political candidates and the salience of these candidates in media content. For both agenda setting and agenda building, mass communication scholars have accumulated convincing evidence over the years, for local elections, national elections, and also during more quiescent political times. Taken together, agenda setting and agenda building research can look back at 400 published studies around the world from 1968 to the present day.

However, despite this immense research corpus, there are still some pressing and intriguing research gaps waiting for scholarly attention. To begin with, there are hardly any studies exploring how agenda building and agenda setting work together during a single campaign or election. Put differently, while we know that agenda setting and agenda building work, we lack a holistic picture on how the policy agenda finds its way to the media agenda, and finally to the public agenda. Of course, there are studies that focus on the relationship between two agendas; however, there are hardly any studies that can track the interdependencies between all agendas that are involved. Second, classic agenda setting and agenda building research has examined candidate salience in election campaigns or issue salience in local, national and international settings. However, no studies so far have examined these effects for direct referendum campaigns. Third, most studies investigating the agenda of political elites have used press releases as a measure of a candidates agenda. However, scholars were not able to conduct standardized interviews with all major campaigners. Compared to press releases, this would be an alternative and even a more direct measure of attribute salience. Fourth and last, agenda setting research is dominated by cross-sectional settings. These

designs have provided rich insights with real world data and gathered convincing evidence for both agenda setting and agenda building. However, cross-sectional studies are unable to portray the dynamics of a campaign over time, and they are unable to meet the basic requirements for establishing causality in agenda setting and agenda building research.

To address these four research gaps, this paper reports about an extensive real world study on a referendum campaign about the asylum law in Switzerland. More specifically, we have conducted interviews with elite campaigners from all major political camps and involved campaign organizations, collected data for a full content analysis of TV and newspaper coverage about those camps, and gathered public opinion data with a three-wave-panel survey. Unlike prior research in this field, our study is unique by covering second-level agenda building and setting effects in a single study using the same measures for all three data sets. Finally, it is the first study of its kind investigating these kinds of effects for a referendum campaign.

### ***Literature Review***

***First and Second Level Agenda Setting.*** In their seminal Chapel Hill study, McCombs and Shaw observed a relationship between the pattern of news coverage of the 1968 presidential election and the key issues of the campaign that the public perceived as important.<sup>3</sup> The core concept of agenda setting research is issue salience. Issue salience has been described as the degree to which an issue is perceived as important, especially relative to other issues.<sup>4</sup> Research over the past thirty-five years has supported the transferal of issue salience to public salience. In this process, agenda-setting is not operative in a universal fashion as a plethora of limiting and contributing variables qualify this media effect. These are, for instance, media reliance<sup>5</sup>, issue obtrusiveness<sup>6</sup>, interpersonal communication<sup>7</sup>, the optimal time span<sup>8</sup>, or need for orientation.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, the emergence of the second level of agenda-setting has prompted a deeper understanding of agenda-setting effects. The second level of agenda-setting refers to a process similar to the transferal of issue salience: Instead of examining an agenda of issues, this line of research investigates an agenda of attributes. The two levels of agenda-setting also imply different types of information processing. While first level agenda-setting involves issues, second level agenda-setting refers to more specific characteristics of objects. These objects can be sub-issues or specific aspects and selections of issues, such as candidate characteristics or issue arguments (cognitive attributes).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the second level of agenda-setting also incorporates specific evaluations or journalistic assessments of issues (affective attributes).<sup>11</sup> Several studies have produced extensive support for this theorizing. McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-

Escobar, and Rey found a positive correlation between the media agenda and the voter agenda for cognitive and affective object attributes.<sup>12</sup> Golan and Wanta documented second level effects in an analysis of the 2000 presidential primary in New Hampshire.<sup>13</sup> Beside those field studies, Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban provided experimental evidence for the transferal of attribute salience.<sup>14</sup>

***First and Second Level Agenda Building.*** Apart from the transferal of issue or object salience to the public, scholars have studied the influences on news media agendas, a type of research that Dearing and Rogers have named agenda building.<sup>15</sup> Gandy was one of the first to suggest to “go beyond agenda-setting to determine who sets the media agenda, how and for what purpose it is set, and with what impact on the distribution of power and values in society”.<sup>16</sup> Weaver, McCombs and Shaw identify three major sources that exert an influence on the media agenda: a) influential news sources such as the president or political elites, b), other elite media sources (intermedia agenda setting), and c), social norms and traditions of journalism.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, studies investigating the agenda building process of political elites have relied on news releases. For instance, Turk showed that state government news releases can increase the public salience of state agencies in subsequent media coverage.<sup>18</sup> In a study on a political campaign, Kaid could demonstrate that newspapers incorporated candidate news releases exactly as they were disseminated.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the first level of agenda building, other studies have investigated how issue attributes put forth by elites have found their way into media coverage (second level agenda building). Huckins, for instance, investigated the building of the media agenda by an influential interest group that succeeded to set the media agenda between 1992 and 1994.<sup>20</sup>

As should be apparent from the previous section, there is convincing evidence for agenda setting and agenda building, both at the issue and at the attribute level. However, there are hardly any studies that have tracked the full flow of issue or attribute salience, from political elites to the news media, and finally to the public. Rare exceptions are first, a study by Kiousis et al. that investigated the building of the agenda in print media by candidates in the 2002 Florida gubernatorial election, and the setting of the public agenda by the media<sup>21</sup>, and second, a study by Kiousis, Popescu and Mitrook that investigated the same linkages between the press releases of 28 U.S. companies, media coverage of the key issues and public opinion in 2005.<sup>22</sup>

***Argument Agenda Setting in Referendum Campaigns.*** The review of previous studies shows that there is a large body of literature investigating (second level) agenda building and agenda

setting effects. However, little is known about how these processes work for referendum campaigns. The study of campaign effects has been predominantly focused on elections. Moreover, most of the research has been conducted in the United States. Thus, the body of evidence is extremely scarce for agenda setting processes in non-American campaigns. In addition, we know even less about the process of the flow of communication in direct-democratic campaigns.

But why do referendum campaigns matter to the study of agenda setting and building, and why are they special? In referendum campaigns, several parties, NGOs, and other organizations form strategic camps; in most instances, one camp opposing the referendum and one camp supporting it. The camps are usually created by forming naturally predictable, pragmatic, or even “strange” strategic alliances. In this process, political parties are not the only actors involved in a campaign. In some campaigns, parties even make up only a minority of all involved actors, as citizens’ interest groups, churches, or NGOs can play a very decisive role. This makes referendums less predictable than regular elections. As de Vresse states, “while longer-term factors such as partisanship or ideology have been found to be important in national elections, the shortterm impact of campaign strategies and tactics can make a substantial difference in determining referendum outcomes.”<sup>23</sup> Even more importantly, contrary to regular democratic elections, no specific candidates exclusively appear in the debate, simply because no candidates are voted for. Thus, voters cannot take candidate cues such as candidate image as a heuristic for their judgment.<sup>24</sup> The crucial difference to voting campaigns is, therefore, that the campaign debate is centered on specific arguments, in favor or opposing the referendum. Each camp tries to promote their arguments in the debate, and the camp with the most salient and thus most compelling arguments wins the referendum.

In terms of agenda setting, those arguments are cognitive issue attributes.<sup>25</sup> Argument salience in a referendum debate can thus be regarded as the second level of agenda setting. The basic idea is that each camp tries to establish their arguments in media coverage. The higher the correlation between the arguments of one camp and the corresponding arguments in the media coverage, the higher is the second level agenda building function of that camp. Likewise, the higher the correspondence between the arguments in the media and the public salience of those arguments, the higher is the second level agenda setting effect. It is important to note that the arguments are transported by the media; usually there is no direct way for a camp to communicate their respective arguments. Following this line of reasoning, it is clear that media reliance becomes a crucial variable in the agenda setting process. When citizens do not rely on the media, agenda setting effects are unlikely to occur. Researchers have found strong

evidence for the role of reliance<sup>26</sup>, and thus we can assume that media reliance is a crucial moderator for second level agenda setting effects.

### ***Study Context and Hypotheses***

In a national referendum in September 2006, the Swiss citizens accepted a new asylum law with 68% in favor and 32% against the referendum. The referendum was launched by the left who tried to fight a tightening of the asylum law that the centre-right had established in parliament. The battle line was between two camps, one camp in favor of the law (i.e., pro tightening asylum policy), and one camp against the new asylum law (i.e., against a tightening of asylum policy). The camps did not only include political parties, but also a large number of other organizations were mobilized, e.g., organizations that support refugees and foreigners, religious organizations, business interest associations, and some domain-specific organizations defending the Swiss national tradition.<sup>27</sup> Taken together, 47 different organizations were mobilized in this referendum, 32 belonged to the camp opposed to a tightening of the asylum law (contra camp), and 15 belonged to the camp that favored a tightening (pro camp). The contra camp included the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Forum for the Integration of Migrants, the Solidarité sans frontières, the Swiss Aid for Refugees, the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, Amnesty International, the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, the Swiss Red Cross, the Young Socialists, and others. On the other side, the pro camp gathered organizations such as all political parties of the moderate (FDP, CVP) and the populist right (SVP), the Federal Ministry of Justice and Police (EJPD), the Federal Office of Migration (BFM), the Swiss Employers' Association, the Association of Small Businesses and Trade, the Association for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland, the Liberal Party, and others.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that all those organizations actively joined the debate, launched a campaign trying to establish their arguments in the media and the public. This unique constellation demonstrates that referendum campaigns are multifaceted and truly different to election campaigns where two political parties try to promote a particular candidate. How agenda setting works in a referendum campaign is, therefore, a hitherto unresolved and very pressing research question.

In order to answer this question, we have, first, interviewed all organizations involved in the campaign. Second, we have conducted an extensive content analysis of relevant media coverage. Third, we gathered public opinion data in a three wave panel study. With all these data at hand, the major aim of this paper is to analyze the flow of arguments from both camps to media coverage, and from media coverage to the public. Based on previous research in agenda building, we assume that there is a significant correlation of campaign arguments with salient



arguments in the media. This relationship should be observable for the arguments of the pro camp, and for the arguments of the contra camp. Therefore, the following two second level agenda building hypotheses H1a and H1b can be derived:

*H1: The salience of arguments favored by the pro camp (H1a), and the salience of arguments favored by the contra camp (H1b) will be positively related to the salience of arguments in media coverage.*

In order to investigate the full flow of arguments, the second hypothesis concerns the second level of agenda setting. It can be assumed that salient arguments in the media will also be the salient arguments for the public. However, based on previous research, it can be expected that this relationship only holds true when the public relies on the mass media. When there is no media reliance, media salience and public salience are thought to be unrelated. This leads us to hypotheses H2a and H2b.

*H2: The salience of arguments in media coverage will be positively related to public argument salience for citizens with high media reliance (H2a), but not for citizens with low media reliance (H2b).*

## **Method**

The hypotheses were tested with data covering interviews with all relevant campaign actors, a media content analysis, and a public opinion panel survey. All data collection procedures exclusively investigated the referendum debate on the asylum law. At the heart of our analysis, we have chosen the seven key arguments prevailing the debate. Those key arguments were selected through an examination of news releases, PR-material, and the parliamentary debate concerning the referendum. Asylum policy is not a new issue, so selecting the key arguments from past debates and previous material was deemed appropriate. Table 1 shows the arguments; four arguments are proposed by the pro camp, and the remaining three are advocated by the contra camp. In order to measure the salience of those arguments, all measures were applied exactly the same way in all three data sources.

**Interviews with Elite Campaigners.** The relevant campaign organizations were identified based on parliamentary debates, voting recommendations, previous media coverage, and campaigners' web sites. By doing so, 47 relevant political parties and organizations were identified. For each organization, we did a standardized interview with the campaign manager. All campaign managers agreed to participate which is not unusual for small countries such as Switzerland. Personal interviews were conducted (and recorded on tape) by two trained scholars

with an MA in political science before the referendum vote, in June 2006. The average duration of an interview was 60 minutes. 32 organizations belong to the contra camp and 15 to the pro camp. This difference in size is due to the fact that the contra organizations came from more diverse backgrounds.<sup>29</sup>

The interviews contained many questions on campaign tactics, campaign outcomes, or campaign funding. As the central variable of this paper, argument salience was measured by asking the question of how important each argument (see table 1) is for the respective organization. More specifically, each argument was presented to the campaigners in exactly the same wording as it was presented in the public opinion survey and measured in content analysis. The questions had to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale. This results in a data set with  $N = 47$  cases, splitting in two camps.

**Media Content.** The content analysis ( $N=3314$ ) started in early June 2006 and ended with the last CATI-interview of the third panel wave at the end of September, 2006. This makes an overall period of nearly four months. The unit of analysis was the argument. Five TV formats of both German- and French speaking television in Switzerland were sampled, including prime time news formats. All news items were sampled that dealt with the asylum law in particular or asylum policy in general. The sample of print media included both elite and non-elite media sources of the German and the French part of Switzerland.<sup>30</sup>

In order to measure argument salience, it was coded whether an argument was present in news coverage or not. Coding was performed by four trained graduate students fluent in both languages. As a reliability check revealed, average agreement for all coders was sufficient (Holsti's  $R = .87$ ).

The sample was divided into three periods, the first ranging from the beginning of the content analysis to the first wave of the panel survey, the second from the first to second wave of the survey, and the third ranging from the second wave of the survey to last interview of the third panel wave. An indicator of argument salience was construed for all three periods as the total number of arguments mentioned in each period in relation the number of all arguments of that period. The more often an argument was mentioned, the higher its salience.

**Panel Survey.** The three wave panel survey was conducted by means of RDD computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI). A renowned global polling company programmed the questionnaire, pretested the study, and performed all interviews. The first wave covered 1725 interviews, in July 2006. 52.2% of the participants were female, the average age was 48.51

(SD=17.11) years. The second panel wave took place in August 2006 with 1415 persons participating again. The third wave took place shortly after the referendum with 1049 persons participating again. It's a representative national survey for the German and French speaking parts of Switzerland.

For each of the above mentioned arguments, argument salience was assessed by the question: "Have you ever heard the following argument?" The arguments were applied in exactly the same way as in the other two data sources. To measure media reliance, participants were asked the following question: "How important is the following media source for you in order to get informed about politics such as the asylum law?" This question was asked with respect to TV and newspaper. The answers were summed up to an overall index of media reliance (Cronbachs Alpha = 0.726). The idea behind this index was that people who regard news media as very important to get informed have generally a high media reliance. The sample was split in two groups by means of a median split. As a control, political orientation was measured on a 10-point scale by asking individuals to place themselves on the scale from left-wing to right-wing (1 = left, 10 = right).

**Data Analysis.** We have three data sets and for all three data sets, we have measured the same seven arguments. In order to combine those data sets, we have to use a statistical technique that can be applied to all data sets at the same time. Therefore, an individualized combination of content analysis and panel data is not possible. As common in almost all agenda setting studies that work with such complex real life data, we have chosen rank-order correlations (Spearman's Rho) as the chief statistical test. This seminal technique<sup>31</sup> is not without its flaws; however, it is the only one that allows a straight forward and easy combination of the relevant data sets. The logic is intuitive: Arguments were ranked according to their salience in all three data sets. For the interviews with campaign organizations, a rank order was calculated for the pro and the contra camp respectively. For the content analysis, a rank order of arguments was calculated for all three phases. Likewise, we calculated a rank order of arguments for every panel wave, and for respondents with high and low media reliance.

## **Results**

In our first two hypotheses (H1a and H1b), we hypothesized that there is a significant correlation between the arguments put forth by campaign strategists and argument salience in the media. Table 2 shows the rank-order correlations for the pro camp, the contra camp, and for all three time periods. As can be seen, there is no significant correlation between the salient

arguments of the contra camp and argument salience in the media. In other words, the contra camp does not succeed in establishing their arguments in news coverage. Throughout the whole campaign, arguments that are very salient in the news media (i.e., arguments having a high rank), are not the arguments put forth by the contra camp. In contrast, we can find a significant correlation between the pro camp arguments and the salience of those arguments in the media. This relationship is significant for all three waves. Therefore, we can generally demonstrate a second level agenda building effect, however, the voices of the contra camp remained largely unheard. That is, the mass media adopt the agenda of arguments of the proponents but not the agenda of the opponents of stricter asylum law. Thus, hypothesis H1a but not H1b can be confirmed.

Our next two hypotheses focused on the second level of agenda setting effects. We assumed to find a significant relationship between argument salience in the media and public argument salience for individuals with high media reliance (H2a). For individuals with low media reliance, we expected no such effects (H2b). Confirming H2b, there is no significant correlation between the two agendas for people that have reported low media reliance. Put differently, the salient arguments of low reliance individuals did not correspond to the salient arguments in the media throughout the whole campaign. As table 3 reveals, there is a significant correlation between media salience and public salience for high reliance individuals. However, this relationship does evolve in the course of the campaign. There is a steady rise of correlations from wave one to wave three, only at wave three, however, these correlations reach statistical significance. Obviously, the cumulated exposure to media content in the course of the whole campaign led to this significant second level agenda setting effect. In order to interpret this finding, we have to keep in mind that we have measured the extent to which audience members have heard of an argument. In wave one, only a small part of the public has heard those arguments, and therefore, the correlation between media salience and public salience is rather low. By the time of wave 3, however, repeated exposure to salient arguments in mass media reporting ensured a high salience of the arguments on the public agenda.

Additionally, we looked at the stability of public salience from wave one to wave 3. For individuals with high media reliance, the stability of argument salience from wave one to wave three is rather low and not significant ( $Rho = .51$ , n.s.). However, there is a high stability of argument salience from wave one to wave three for respondents with low media reliance ( $Rho = .89$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, people with high media reliance were more volatile; they were more influenced by the campaign compared to people with low media reliance. This result does confirm hypotheses H2a and H2b.

In order to understand the full flow of arguments, we did some additional analyses. To begin with, we have examined the relationship between argument salience for the pro and the contra camp and public argument salience. The results are depicted in table 4. As can be seen, there is no correspondence between argument salience of both campaign camps and public salience for citizens with low media reliance. All depicted correlations do not reach statistical significance. Obviously, individuals with low media reliance were not interested in the asylum law, so their agenda does not correspond to the agenda of the mass media and political campaigners. However, for pro camp arguments, we can find a significant correlation for individuals with high media reliance. As table 4 reveals, there is an obvious rise of correlations from  $Rho = .11$  (n.s.) for wave one,  $Rho = .40$  (n.s.) for wave two, and finally,  $Rho = .83$  ( $p < .001$ ) for wave three. This means, at wave three, the argument agenda of the pro camp significantly corresponds to public salience of arguments. Of course, this does not mean that there is a direct effect from the campaign to the public. In contrast, this result illustrates that the arguments put forth by the pro camp were successfully implemented in media coverage, and finally reached the public. Consequently, the pro camp succeeded with the fundamental goal of every campaigner: To steer media attention and to impose a dominant argumentation on the audience.

Still the question remains, why the contra camp did not succeed in imposing their agenda of arguments? It seems reasonable to assume that the contra camp did, at least, reach its own partisans. Therefore, we have divided the survey sample into the political left and the political right by our political orientation measure. Interestingly, there is no correspondence between the arguments of the contra camp and the arguments of politically left respondents (Wave three,  $Rho = -.07$ , n.s.). Less surprising, there is also no correlation between contra camp argument salience and right wing respondents ( $Rho = .25$ , n.s.). In contrast, there is a correlation between argument salience of the pro camp and right wing respondents ( $Rho = .70$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and again, no significant correlation between pro camp argument salience and left wing respondents ( $Rho = .38$ , n.s.). This means, while the pro camp has reached its own partisans with their arguments (through the mass media), the contra camp failed to bring out their argument agenda to their own discipleship.

## ***Discussion***

Compared to “usual” party elections, referendum campaigns are special. In referendums, no political candidates exclusively appear in the public spotlight, and thus, campaign tactics built on candidate personality, a candidate’s history, or candidate horse race are not relevant. As a matter of fact, referendum campaigns are about arguments. The flow of arguments from political

elites to the media and to the public will be decisive for the campaign outcome. This study was the first of its kind to test the impact of second level agenda setting and building in a referendum campaign. The results of this study demonstrate the full flow of arguments, top down, from the political elites to the news media, and to the public. More specifically, it was shown that the proponents of the asylum law did succeed in bringing their argumentation into news coverage which, in turn, increased public salience for their agenda. As the outcome of the referendum demonstrates, this campaign success made them win the vote. In addition to that, the results have also shown that the mass media have no direct or uniform effect on all audience members. In fact, only those individuals that heavily relied on the mass media for political information were influenced by salient media arguments. Individuals with low media reliance have kept their eyes and ears shut, and therefore, the campaign yielded no effects whatsoever for this group.

In practical terms, we have learned that the contra camp failed to communicate their agenda, as the media simply did not adopt it. In order to interpret this, we have to take the general political climate of Switzerland into account. From past referendums about asylum policy, the outcome of the referendum was rather predictable. This fact was also acknowledged by both camps in our interviews. Given long-term public opinion data, the pro camp generally expected to win and did tell us so. For the contra camp, in contrast, some campaign planners admitted that they see minimal chances to win the vote. Nevertheless, they were heading for the fight for reasons of public reputation, credibility, and fundamental values.<sup>32</sup> Keeping this in mind, it can be speculated that the media favored the arguments of the winning side. If so, there could be many explanations for this. One possible rationale could be that news media are always in a struggle to win audiences and sustain readership, and therefore, they chose to give the public to some extent simply what it demands. Beside this speculation, it is also noteworthy that the contra camp did not even reach its own left wing followers in the broad public.

Another aspect that has been revealed in the interviews that helps to understand our findings: In contrast to the opponents of a tighter asylum law, the strategy of the proponents was more efficient: They denied the most important arguments of their adversaries less than the opponents did. For instance, the most important argument of the contra camp was the third most important argument for the pro camp. Conversely, the contra camp judged the most important argument of their adversaries as the least important argument in the political discourse. Thus, by discrediting their political adversaries, the contra camp may have adopted a position that had been considered as too extreme, both in the mass media arena and in the broader public. Put bluntly, when you deny all other arguments, you are given a hard time in a debate, as you can only push your very own arguments to the agenda, but not others. In contrast, when you are

supporting a tightening of asylum policy, and furthermore even acknowledge and use the arguments of the contra camp, you have a much more powerful arsenal of arguments. Similar results had been obtained in early persuasion studies on the effects of one-sided versus two-sided communication and refutational versus non-refutational appeals.<sup>33</sup> This could be a hint that the wrong argumentation was chosen by contra camp campaign planners, and that other arguments might have been more appropriate and successful.

Beyond the specific context of the asylum law campaign, our study is unique in several aspects. First of all, as one of the first in the scholarly study of agenda building, we have conducted a huge amount of interviews with all relevant campaigners that were involved in the referendum. These data provide extremely rich and unique insights into campaign tactics. Such data are the most direct measure of a strategic actor's agenda. Conducting standardized interviews with the major campaigners, and letting them answer the very same standardized set of arguments, is certainly better and more reliable than content analyzing campaign outlets such as political advertising or press releases. As another advantage of this study, we jointly observed agenda building and agenda setting in one single study. Related to that, we were able to track the dynamic success of the campaign over time. By conducting a panel survey, we could observe an increase of correlations between the agendas over a period of several months. This result gives support for the idea that real world agenda building and setting effects have to be understood as cumulative, long-term effects. Interestingly, a recent study by Son and Weaver comes to the same conclusion.<sup>34</sup> Although short-term effects can be demonstrated in the laboratory, it is the pushing of a whole agenda of arguments over a period of time that can exert a measureable influence on public opinion. Phrased with a common saying, one could say: "Constant dripping wears away the stone".

Notwithstanding the rich and methodologically demanding data, there are some drawbacks of the present study that need to be carefully considered. To begin with, we have used rank-order correlations as the statistical procedure to observe agenda building and setting effects. Although this might be the only way to jointly analyze these rich sets of data, this technique has many flaws and is, of course, not suited to establish full causality. Second, we have assumed that survey respondents have actually read the articles and news stories we have content analyzed. As should be apparent, it is not possible to control that every news story or newspaper article in the content analysis was relevant to our respondents. Third, we have to consider that interviews with political campaigners might lead to a desirability bias as some campaigners will play their cards close to the chest. Beside these limitations, we nevertheless believe that such large-scale real world studies are not without its merits. Of course, the gain in

external validity comes at a cost of internal validity. However, such data allow insights into the intertwined relationship between mass communication and society that are hard to accomplish otherwise. Therefore, a fruitful cross-fertilization would result from the joint accomplishment of large scale multi-method studies like the present one coupled with smaller studies that can establish a truly causal link between the agendas.



Table 1

*Arguments put forth by the Pro Camp and the Contra Camp*

Pro Camp	Contra Camp
The abuse of asylum policy must be stopped.	The humanitarian tradition of Switzerland must be maintained.
The execution of asylum politics must be more efficient.	The rights of asylum seekers have to be protected.
Switzerland is too attractive for asylum seekers.	Foreign people contribute to the social and cultural quality of Switzerland.
There are already too many foreigners in Switzerland.	

Table 2

*Correlation between Campaign Camp Argument Salience and Media Argument Salience*

		Argument Salience Wave 1	Media	Argument Salience Wave 2	Media	Argument Salience Wave 3	Media
Argument	Salience	.85**		.79*		.86**	
Pro Camp							
Argument	Salience	.29		.11		.23	
Contra Camp							

Note: Note: \*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$

Table 3

*Correlation between Media Argument Saliency and Public Argument Saliency for Individuals with High and Low Media Reliance*

		High Media Reliance			Low Media Reliance		
		Argument Public Saliency	Argument Public Saliency	Argument Public Saliency	Argument Public Saliency	Argument Public Saliency	Argument Public Saliency
		Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Argument Media Saliency	Wave 1	.07	.25	.79*	-.21	.07	.00
Argument Media Saliency	Wave 2	.21	.32	.82**	-.31	.00	-.14
Argument Media Saliency	Wave 3	.29	.47	.92**	-.16	.18	.07

Note: Note: \*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$

Table 4

*Correlation between Campaign Camp Argument Salience and Public Argument Salience for Individuals with High and Low Media Reliance*

	High Media Reliance			Low Media Reliance		
	Argument Public Salience	Argument Public Salience	Argument Public Salience	Argument Public Salience	Argument Public Salience	Argument Public Salience
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Argument Salience Pro Camp	.11	.40	.83**	.02	.29	.27
Argument Salience Contra Camp	-.50	-.36	.00	.64	.64	.64

Note: Note: \*\*  $p < .001$

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (Summer 1972) 176-87.
- <sup>2</sup> James Dearing and Everett Rogers, *Agenda-Setting*, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media," 185.
- <sup>4</sup> Dearing and Rogers, *Agenda Setting*.
- <sup>5</sup> Wayne Wanta, *The Public and the National Agenda: How People Learn About Important Issues*, (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), Wayne Wanta and Yu-Wei Hu, "The effects of credibility, reliance and exposure on media agenda setting: A path analysis model", *Journalism Quarterly* 71(Spring 1994), 90-98.
- <sup>6</sup> David Pearce Demers, Dennis Craff, Yang-Ho Choi and Beth M. Pession, "Issue Obtrusiveness and the Agenda-Setting Effects of National Network News," *Communication Research* 16 (Dec 1989): 793-812.
- <sup>7</sup> Wayne Wanta and Yi-Chen Wu, "Interpersonal Communication and the Agenda-Setting Process," *Journalism Quarterly* 69 (Winter 1992): 847-55.
- <sup>8</sup> Aileen Yagade and David M. Dozier, "The Media Agenda-Setting Effect of Concrete versus Abstract Issues," *Journalism Quarterly* 67 (Spring 1990): 3-10.
- <sup>9</sup> David H. Weaver, "Audience Need for Orientation and Media Effects," *Communication Research* 7 (Summer 1980): 361-76; Jörg Matthes, "The Need for Orientation towards News Media: Revising and Validating a Classic Concept," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (Winter 2006), 422-44.
- <sup>10</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Salma Ghanem, "The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing," in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives and our Understanding*, ed. Stephan Reese, Oscar Gandy and August Grant (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Ass., 2001), 67-81.
- <sup>11</sup> McCombs and Ghanem, "The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing,"; Maxwell McCombs, Esteban Lopez-Escobar and Juan Pablo Llamas, "Setting the Agenda of Attributes in the 1996 Spanish General Election," *Journal of Communication* 50 (Summer 2000): 77-92.
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- <sup>13</sup> Guy Golan and Wayne Wanta, "Second-Level Agenda-Setting in the New Hampshire Primary: A Comparison of Coverage in three Newspapers and Public Perceptions of Candidates", *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 78 (Summer 2001): 247-59.
- <sup>14</sup> Spiro Kioussis, Philemon Bantimaroudis and Hyun Ban "Candidate image attributes - Experiments on the substantive dimension of second level agenda setting," *Communication Research* 26 (Aug 1999): 414-28.
- <sup>15</sup> Dearing and Rogers, *Agenda Setting*.
- <sup>16</sup> Oscar H. Gandy, ed., *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982), 266.

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<sup>17</sup> David H. Weaver, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "Agenda-Setting Research: Issues, Attributes, and Influences," in *Handbook of Political Communication Research*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Ass., 2004), 257-82.

<sup>18</sup> Judy Van Slyke Turk, "Public Relations' Influence on the News," *Newspaper Research Journal* 4 (summer 1986): 15-28.

<sup>19</sup> Lynda Lee Kaid, "Newspaper Treatment of Candidate News Releases," *Journalism Quarterly* 53 (Spring 1976): 135-7.

<sup>20</sup> Kyle Huckins, "Interest-Group Influence in the Media Agenda: A Case Study," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* (Spring 1999), 76-86.

<sup>21</sup> Spiro Kiouisis, Michael Mitrook, Xu Wu and Trent Seltzer, "First- and Second-Level Agenda-Building and Agenda-Setting Effects: Linkages Among Candidate News Releases, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion During the 2002 Florida Gubernatorial Election," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 18 (3 2006), 265-85.

<sup>22</sup> Spiro Kiouisis, Christina Popescu and Michael Mitrook, "Understanding Influence on Corporate Reputation: An Examination of Public Relations Efforts, Media Coverage, Public Opinion, and Financial Performance From Agenda-Building and Agenda-Setting Perspective," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 19 (2 2007), 147-65.

<sup>23</sup> Claes de Vreese, "When referendum campaigns matter – and why", Paper presented at the 57th conference of the International Communication Association ICA, San Francisco, May 2007, 2.

<sup>24</sup> de Vreese 2007, "When referendum campaigns matter."

<sup>25</sup> McCombs and Ghanem, "The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing,"; Julie Yioutas and Ivana Segvic, "Revisting the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal: The convergence of agenda setting and framing", *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (Autumn 2003), 570.

<sup>26</sup> Wanta, *The Public and the National Agenda*; Wanta and Hu, "The effects of credibility, reliance and exposure on media agenda setting."

<sup>27</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi, Laurent Bernhard and Regula Hänggli, "Coalition formation in direct-democratic campaigns: a case study of the vote on the Swiss asylum law", *NCCR Democracy Working Paper Nr. 12*.

<sup>28</sup> Kriesi, Bernhard and Hänggli, "Coalition formation."

<sup>29</sup> Kriesi, Bernhard and Hänggli, "Coalition formation."

<sup>30</sup> The TV formats included: Tagesschau, Arena, Le journal (19.30), SF Rundschau, TSR Infrarouge. The investigated Newspapers included: Blick, Sonntagsblick, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, NZZ am Sonntag, Tagesanzeiger, Sonntagszeitung, 20 Minuten, Aargauer Zeitung, Basler Zeitung, Berner Zeitung, Neue Luzerner Zeitung, Die Südostschweiz, St. Galler Tagblatt, Le Matin, Le Temps, Tribune de Genève, 24 heures, 20 minutes.

<sup>31</sup> McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function," 180.

<sup>32</sup> Kriesi, Bernhard and Hänggli, "Coalition formation."

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<sup>34</sup> Young Jun Son and David H. Weaver, "Another Look at What Moves Public Opinion: Media Agenda Setting and Polls in the 2000 U.S. Election," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 18 (2 2006), 174–197.